

## Tech & the left interview #1 - Adrian Smith

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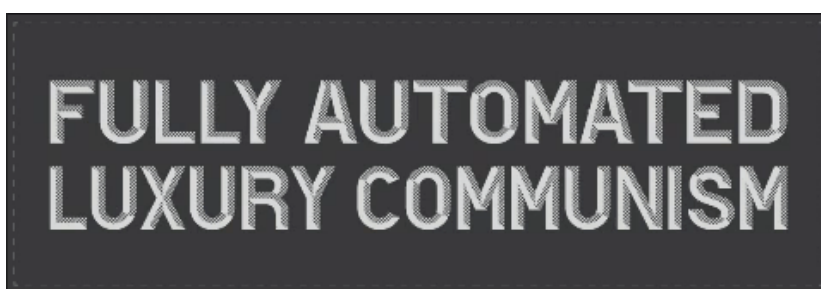
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# Tech & the left interview #1 - Adrian Smith

by Fully Automated Luxury Communism Newsletter

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Hi everyone,

You are reading issue #13 of the fully automated luxury communism newsletter. If you have not done so yet, you can subscribe at the [this link](#). You can also share this newsletter with anyone interested through that link.

Every two weeks this newsletter brings links, snippets and interesting facts about technology from a left perspective. It hopes to spark a greater discussion among the left about the opportunities and threats that tech brings.

I am excited to present to you the first interview in this newsletter. I hope the newsletter will become a source of debate among progressives about technology, and what better way to do that but to invite other people to present their views.

For this issue I am very honoured to interview [Adrian Smith](#). Smith is Professor of Technology and Society at the Science Policy Research Unit, University of Sussex, UK; and Visiting Professor at the Centro de Innovación en Tecnología para el Desarrollo Humano at the Universidad Politécnica de Madrid. We talk about automation, bottom-up innovation, tech policy in Barcelona and what he what he thinks Corbyn should do. He can be found at: [@smithadrianpaul](#) on twitter.

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## Interview: Adrian Smith

### What is post-automation, and could you explain some of your thinking on it?

“Well, for a start, there is nothing automatic about automation. The term post-automation is intended to reflect that fact. It’s a way of describing challenges to the assumptions of automation developers and proponents, and attempts to open technology up to wider social practices. If we look at social studies of technology, for example, you’ll see repeatedly how machines do not appear autonomously of society, but emerge through myriad social choices, and that societies shape technologies. Technologies bear the imprint of their developers, and the cultures of the users that adopt, adapt or reject these technologies. Current concerns over the prejudices baked into algorithms and the purposes to which they are put is an example.

So, it seems strange to me just how much automation policy focuses on the ‘impact’ technology will have on jobs and society, as if particular technological futures were an unavoidable force of nature. That way of looking at technology suits the interests of incumbent developers, and unduly privileges the trajectories of development that they want to make happen. If you look carefully at groups working in [open hardware](#) networks and makerspaces for example, you’ll see they are subverting, adapting and appropriating many of the technological ingredients of ‘automation’ - computation, sensors, actuators, computer numerically controlled machine tools, design software, microelectronics, internet platforms, 3D scanners/printers, video, etc. But the technologies are being taken in directions and used for purposes quite different to industrial automation. They’re working along technological trajectories inspired by social visions quite different to the ‘cyber-physical systems’ of Industry 4.0 advocates. Instead, activists are pursuing ideas for commons-based peer-production, knowledge as commons, free culture, solidarity economy and commitments to social values like sustainable development.

So, if we begin with the reality that technologies emerge in plural ways through complex social relations between people, then the future looks much more contingent and open. The diversity of sociotechnical experiments might not provide us with a blueprint for the future, but they do open up debate in very practical ways. Such plurality is vital. The challenge rests in confronting the discriminatory power relations and privileges that undermine such plurality, and that naturalises automation.

So, the term post-automation is really just drawing attention to all these things. Things that have been known for a long time. It’s worth adding that “post-” doesn’t mean anti-automation nor a sequence after automation. Automation [controversies](#) in the 1970s and 1980s, for example, prompted radical researchers and organised workers to open spaces for experiments with worker-centred computer-integrated-manufacturing, and whose methods for enhancing rather than displacing labour had lasting influence in [participatory technology design](#). Post- means interrogating any naturalisation of automation and trying out other foundations for advanced technology.”

### What are some ways grassroots innovation in technology is playing out? Why is it important?

“I think grassroots innovations are vital, and not just in post-automation, but for democratizing technological and social innovation more generally. What is important are the encounters between grassroots and institutionalized spaces for innovation, and the resulting creative tensions, uneasy co-optations and renewed mobilizations. The thing that interests me about radical grassroots activity is the way it continually opens experimentation to practices

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innovation agencies, firms, investors, and so on. It means we get to see what technology looks like, or might look like if resources were distributed more widely, when built with different cultural, political and economic values at the fore.

Take sustainable development as an example, where there is lots of grassroots activity, and then think about how automation relates to that. Many governments have committed to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals for 2030 (SDGs). And yet you would not know this from automation debates and policy, where there is scant attention given to sustainability. Even pertinent SDGs like decent work, responsible production and consumption, and responsible innovation don't get much of a mention. Instead, automation studies extrapolate future impacts on the basis of economic growth models and labour productivity imperatives that are driving societies into multiple crises.

Grassroots innovators are creating devices and practices that can be useful for other groups in society, such as small-scale renewable energy technologies, or specialist apparatus for people with [different abilities](#). Grassroots innovators can work on issues or social problems ignored, or even suppressed, by corporate and state interests, and thereby cultivate levels of sociotechnical diversity that are important for democracy. I think their activity underscores the importance of social rights to alter, repair, repurpose, and open up technology in society. The [Restart Project](#) is a great example of how practical community work, fixing electronics, can mobilise interest and debate on big issues like the political economy of electronics manufacture and positive responses to our material culture with disposable devices. I recently [wrote](#) something about this, including many examples, with my colleague Andy Stirling, so if this is of interest, then I'd suggest that as a good place to start."

**You see the left-led Greater London Council (which included John McDonnell) during the eighties prefiguring hackerspaces, could you explain this?**

"Well, the GLC in the early 1980s was a good example of creating opportunities for progressive initiatives, including grassroots action. Londoner's voted in a Labour Council with quite a [radical agenda](#) for rescuing and reviving industry and manufacturing in London. The idea was to create co-operatives and promote workplace democracy. The Council founded the Greater London Enterprise Board in order to invest in such initiatives. One strand of the strategy involved the creation of five Technology Networks in different parts of London, and that would be dedicated to different topics, like energy, mobility, ICT. The Technology Networks enabled anyone to walk in off the street and prototype their ideas. Machinery, technical help and training was on hand to help people develop their prototypes, develop the skills needed, seek investment and organize cooperative economic activity in order to move beyond a prototype. In return, people were encouraged to share their ideas in an open product bank, so that others could access and adapt the designs.

These ideas had been bubbling away for a few years. They were associated with a movement for socially useful production which had emerged in the 1970s from worker initiatives in workplace democracy and alternative industrial strategies, arms conversion and peace movements, and left environmentalists, and which in turn had been inspired by the Lucas Plan. When political power at the GLC moved in a direction sympathetic to these movements, so activists welcomed the recognition, space and resources provided by the Council.

If you're familiar with hackerspaces and makerspaces, then you'll already see the similarities between these and the Technology Networks back then: to link grassroots creativity to a co-

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digital platforms and global reach, and with the opportunities available today looking quite different too. Nevertheless, we can learn many important lessons about strategies for today by reflecting on that earlier experience - particularly about the importance of connecting with local communities, and the power needed to create cooperative political economies.”

**You are in Spain at the moment, why is the Barcelona city council's approach to smart cities so interesting?**

“I’ve been doing bits of fieldwork in Barcelona, on and off, over the last four years. More recently I’ve been a visiting researcher here at itdUPM in Madrid. So, I’ve not been comparing the two cities, just doing different things in each. Nevertheless, it has been interesting to notice similarities, differences and connections as I’ve gone about those different jobs. For example, both cities have been pioneering digital participatory democracy in urban governance.

One of the biggest criticisms against the smart city is the way corporate technology vendors are promising to help run cities more efficiently and fix development challenges. And whilst the set up of these platforms can be adapted and modified around the edges, it follows the same, closed product logic [pioneered](#) originally in military logistics and commercialised in enterprise resource planning. Ultimately, however, urban development is a political matter, not a technical issue. Ceding key elements of city governance to tech vendors is worrying from a democratic perspective. So, some cities, including [Barcelona](#) and Madrid, are trying to use technology in a different way, with citizens at the centre of things in decisions over data collection and use, or participation in urban prototyping, the running of city services, and budget allocation. As Barcelona’s digital policy describes it, they are trying to move ‘beyond the smart city’ and instigate greater ‘technological sovereignty’.

Such aspirations are not new, but the technologies to help do it are new, and they open up innovative possibilities for experimenting with new forms of urban democracy. But without the capacity and infrastructure to experiment and adapt locally, progressive groups and city leaders will not be able to explore such possibilities. Amongst the strategic lessons being generated are the limits presented by national constitutions and even world trade rules, that limit the authority of municipalities to exercise greater autonomy over the development and purchasing of technologies. Though we should also recognize how national and international policies also assist municipalities in other respects.

Just as fascinating as these lessons, however, is growing recognition that these experiments need to be taken down a level too. Intriguingly, even though progressive digital technologies can involve citizens over wider scales and in ways previously unimaginable, they are simultaneously leading to greater demands for old-fashioned community development and street-level action, especially when it comes to making participation meaningful and earning legitimacy to implement digitally-mediated decisions locally. So platform activities in Barcelona and Madrid are also being linked back into neighbourhood processes. And which is where the impulse for these developments came from originally - providing free software tools that interconnected the diverse actions of 15-M in the plazas and neighbourhood assemblies. The dynamic and ethos is very different to corporate moves on the city. It all comes back to the points in post-automation, about the importance of keeping people in the picture with any technology.”

**If you would speak to Corbyn today, what would you suggest he should pay attention to regarding a progressive approach to tech?**

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much work (and future jobs) there is for us all to do: creating local circular economies, transforming energy and mobility systems, refurbishing our housing stock, more convivial forms of sustainable production and consumption, appropriate lifelong education, care services and health reforms, and so on and so on. Technology can help, and many sustainable technologies already exist, but what is often lacking is the social organisation, political power and economic models to put them to widespread use.

So, I'd suggest developing locally adaptable policies that help connect, spread and invest in initiatives like those mentioned before, and that step up a level to explore new forms of economic development. Policies are needed that invest in spaces, facilities, training and opportunities for people to cultivate a much more open engagement with technology and grassroots sustainability. Historically, what little top-down policy support existed was always trying to fit grassroots experiments into prevailing economic models, whereas a transformational agenda would turn things upside down. A radical government can help connect these spaces to institutional reforms, so that the economic, cultural and social institutions we need for sustainable societies actually learn from the long history of grassroots experimentation. Of course, the need for policies for dealing with incumbent industries and the power of capital does not disappear with this new, grassroots branch of innovation policy - the progressive regulation of incumbent economic sectors remains - but rather it is about giving greater attention and investment, and redistributing power, across more diverse activity.

It has become somewhat trite to say that transformations to sustainability demand deep and radical changes that affect us all. Even the so-called elites at Davos say as much. But that also means the changes have to be democratic. They probably imply new forms of democracy, like the experiments in Madrid and Barcelona. The dark forces of popular authoritarianism exploiting the current conjuncture need to be confronted and resisted. One element to that has to be practical and inclusive demonstration of more hopeful possibilities, based in networked, decentralised and horizontal activity that matters for people's daily routines. People are already prototyping and pioneering, whether through social innovation, civic economy, green business, solidarity economy, or whatever, and they are building up considerable experience. The diversity they are creating has tremendous social value, especially as a source of democratic innovative capacity. I'd encourage any government to recognise the value of such diversity and the benefits that brings to its public support."

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Bye...

This was issue #13 of the fully automated luxury communism newsletter.

This newsletter and my own thoughts are very much a work in progress, so any tips, comments, messages or corrections are very much welcomed.

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